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Abuses of Secrecy

The Walker spy case has counterintelligence experts more worried than they've admitted. The baffling thing about the principals in this case is that they had no obvious emotional or financial difficulties that might have tipped off investigators.

The FBI acknowledges that the best way to catch a traitor is to have an honest colleague get suspicious and blow the whistle. In the Walker case, it was family members who did the whistle-blowing.

The danger now is that government officials will panic. If they decide to respond to the Walker case by classifying even more nonsensitive material and prying even deeper into private lives, America could be transformed into a police state.

Aside from the appalling effect such measures would have on the lives of millions of Americans, the evidence suggests they wouldn't work. Classifying more material would overload our security systems and cheapen the supposed secrets to the point where no one would take them seriously.

Bureaucrats who create spurious secrets to hide their own misconduct or incompetence need no encouragement. Here are some examples of secrecy abuse uncovered by our associate Donald Goldberg:

■ Two years ago the General Accounting Office warned the Pentagon that its "special access" contract procedure was being misused. These are contracts for work so sensitive that ordinary security investigation is deemed inadequate. The GAO concluded that these special contracts were being used more for convenience than to protect national security. They were being used to cut down on processing time, to facilitate sole-source contract awards, and sometimes to keep rival military services from learning anything about the project.

The Pentagon brass didn't want the GAO's embarrassing disclosures made public. They tried to classify the report. The GAO objected, pointing out that none of the information it presented in its critique of the system was classified. But the Pentagon had its way, and all but a small part of the GAO findings went into an unpublished report—that we obtained anyway.

■ The Drug Enforcement Administration and the CIA reclassified a GAO report that had already been declassified, simply because a member of the public requested a copy. The report was a review of the bickering between the two agencies that had impaired their highly publicized war on drug smugglers.

■ The State Department classified more than 130 reports from U.S. embassies around the world after we tried to get copies. The reports contained responses to a questionnaire on how American officials are treated in various countries. The ambassadors hadn't classified their responses, but bureaucrats in Foggy Bottom called in retired foreign service officers as consultants to classify the material.

■ U.S. intelligence agencies routinely stamp as "secret" reports listing countries that have developed nuclear weapons. But these reports—which we've seen—are frequently less informative, and less accurate, than stories in major newspapers and magazines.

■ In recognition of the fact that secret documents aren't always so secret, the Pentagon routinely excises sensitive portions of its annual five-year plan for the military, called the Defense Guidance, before it is distributed. The "secret" stamp, which it bears, isn't considered adequate protection.

■ The Federal Emergency Management Agency is installing what it calls a "sound cover system" for the fifth-floor offices of its Washington headquarters. It's supposed to mask sensitive conversations to thwart eavesdroppers. One security expert described the system as "a glorified means of getting background music."

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